

## Lab engineer moonlights as portrait artist

July 6, 2016



Gene Ortega's [vivid paintings](#) explore religious iconography in portraits, often drawing on the imagery of saints, the Virgin Mary, and Christ that surrounded him growing up.

"With the religious paintings, I keep the traditional colors and profiles but change enough to make them modern," he says, noting that his paintings don't come alive until he gets the eyes right. "I focus on the eyes because they give the painting a soul."

### **"Go paint!"**

As a young man, Ortega found formal art classes frustrating and stifling. "The instructors were always saying, 'No, no, paint this way,' " he says. "They wanted me to paint like them."



Engineer and artist Gene Ortega.

But Ortega had his own passionate ideas about art, which found full expression when he began studying with the painter George Yepes. Ortega discovered Yepes through an album cover that “floored” him: the skeletons and roses imagery on “La Pistola y El Corazón” by the rock band Los Lobos. The painting had “a totally different spin” on familiar Day of the Dead imagery, Ortega says. “It got my attention, that and the colors and the chaotic nature of the way he painted, the strong strokes.”

By 1996, Ortega had earned an engineering degree from New Mexico State University and had a corporate job in Los Angeles. He began studying with Yepes at Academia de Yepes, contributed to a large mural at NASA, and showed his own paintings at galleries in East LA.

“George showed me the tools and techniques, then said, ‘Go paint!’” Ortega recalls.

## Homecoming

Ortega moved back to the Española area in 2011 to take an engineering position at the Lab. He's glad to be back among friends and family and the easily accessed solitude of the New Mexico mountains. This summer he will show his art at the [Contemporary Hispanic Market](#) in Santa Fe on July 30–31. Don't miss it!

[\*Read a longer version of this profile here.\*](#)

**Los Alamos National Laboratory**

[www.lanl.gov](http://www.lanl.gov)

**(505) 667-7000**

**Los Alamos, NM**

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